

Modern, yet historic

Drumlin Road home designed by Walter Gropius undergoes renovation

By Sarah Andrews
STAFF WRITER

Right now, Irena Shaar's house is a mess. The walls of her kitchen and living room are reduced to piles of rubble and concrete chunks scattered among tufts of fuzzy, yellow insulation on the floor. Particles of sheetrock fall through the air as dust-masked men drive hammers and picks into what is left of the inside of her house.

But standing in the back doorway with a dust-halo, Shaar is grinning at the sight.

"I am happy and excited," she said. "We've waited two years for this."

In 2002, Shaar, a Russian immigrant, and her husband, Doron, an Israeli immigrant, bought the house on Drumlin Road. At the time, they felt they were within reach of their own, personal American dream. After eyeing the half-century old structure with the modern exterior for six years while living down the street, the Shaars thought all they needed were a few renovations to make the house perfect.

But after hiring architect Charles Navratil of Architects 2 and local contractor Cindy Stumpo to do the work, the couple approached the city's Historical Commission with the plans and were shocked to quickly find their home added to a list of only 12 landmarked homes in Newton.

The reason? The Shaars' home was designed by the members of one of the most influential groups in modern architecture, The Architect's Collaborative, or TAC, led by contemporary pioneer and Bauhaus designer Walter Gropius.

According to the city's preservation planner, Lara Kritzer, the house is the only one in Newton designed by an architect of Gropius' magnitude.

"We know why they landmarked this house," said Stumpo. "It's a no-brainer. Tak-

ing down a Walter Gropius house would be like taking down a Frank Lloyd Wright house. The chances of that happening are second to none."

Gropius, a German native, is known for starting a modern design trend. Many of his buildings combine rectangular structures and have a sharp, linear and minimalist appearance, as reflected in the Shaars' house. Sitting atop a small hill at the corner of Drumlin and Dudley Roads on the south side of Newton, the white house looks simply like two long rectangles sitting on top of each other in a perpendicular position.

"It's so simple, it looks like two box-cars were brought in and dropped from space," said Navratil, the architect. "If you look at minimalism today, this is a prime example."

In 1946, while Gropius was chairman of Harvard's architecture department and forming TAC with five of his students, a man named Arthur Kaplan commissioned him to design a house in Newton. The house, now owned by the Shaars, is known in historical circles as the Kaplan House.

The Kaplan House was actually designed by TAC member John Harkness, but done under the influence and guise of Gropius and in line with Gropius' personal design principles evident in some of his most famous buildings — the Bauhaus School in Dessau, Germany, and his own private residence in Lincoln, now a museum, called the Gropius House.

Gropius earned fame and attention largely because of the simplicity of his designs and their attention to functionality.

Yet, what the Shaars quickly learned after living in the house for more than a year is that what was functional in 1946 is defunct today.

"We needed to bring in today's style of living and luxury," said Shaar, who added that the house

had a host of environmental problems and an uncomfortable interior design, like small 10-by-10 foot bedrooms with accordion doors.

"They were literally sleeping chambers, which was part of the Bauhaus style," said Navratil. "It was very much a utilitarian kid of thing."

To bring the house up-to-date, Navratil and Stumpo decided to double the size to 7,000 square feet, raise the second-floor roof by one foot and redo the entire interior. But keeping with the Historical Commission's concerns, protecting the exterior perspective and keeping changes in-line with Gropius' style, proved to be a challenge to both.

"This is a very tough building. It's complicated," said Stumpo, who pointed out that it's more difficult to integrate things like modern air conditioning systems into a house with a flat roof.

Navratil, who specializes in more traditional houses, approached the commission first with three perspective drawings. To keep the renovated house similar to the original house, he distributed the additions around the structure, so there were no radical changes, and kept the proportions and window patterns the same.

"That was the trick," said Shaar. "You won't see much difference unless you're on the Historic Board and know exactly what was being changed. And that was the purpose, to do what Gropius would have done."

Though Stumpo acknowledged the Historical Commission could have flatly denied the Shaars' request to change the house at all, the board was ultimately sympathetic with the need to change the home's interior and approved Navratil's designs, which Stumpo calls "very sensitive."

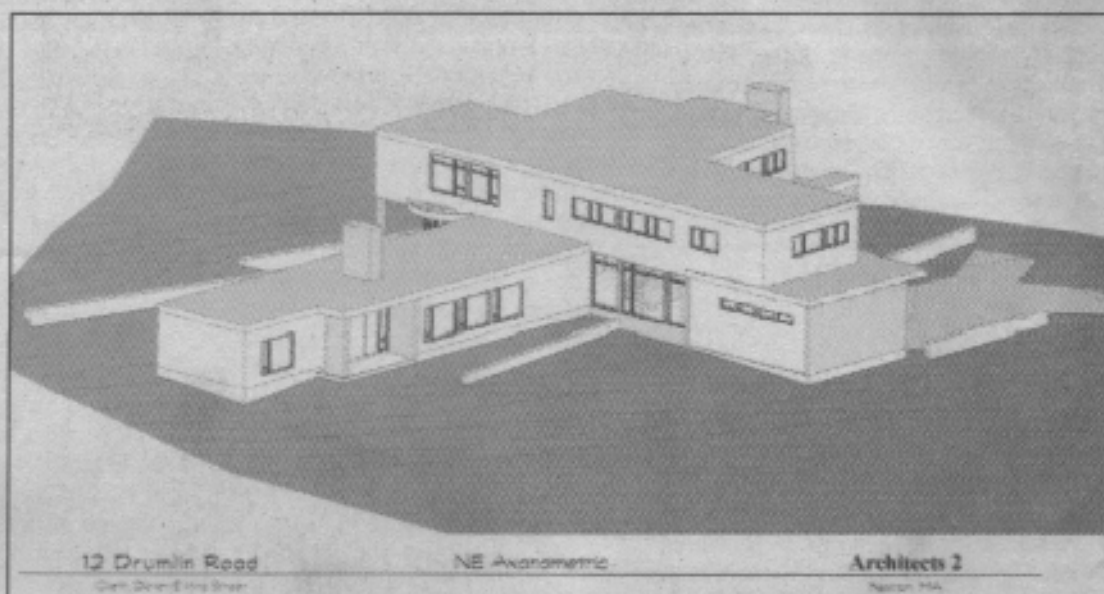
"I commend them for their decision on this," Stumpo said.

"This is our American dream and that's what I told the board,"



Surveyor Denise LeBlanc of Danvers works in the backyard area of the house.

STAFF PHOTO BY EV WALKER



12 Drumlín Road
Danvers, MA

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Architects 2
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A perspective of what the Kaplan House, designed in 1946 by Walter Gropius' architecture collaborative and now owned by Irena and Doron Shaar, will look like after the renovations are finished. The plans will leave the street-side exterior roughly the same while doubling the size of the house.

said Shaar. "We're a young immigrant family who moved here for a chance to build our own American dream, but we couldn't totally preserve the house, because the times have changed. You have to update it so it will last another 60 years. We came at the right time, because we are getting what we want and the city will keep a unique house."

Construction on the house began last week and is expected to be complete in less than a year. The Shaars have moved out to a nearby townhouse.

Shaar admitted that while she's honored to live in a house

with historical significance, the financial burden of owning a landmarked home might have initially driven her away.

"If we knew it was going to be landmarked, I am not sure we would have bought it," she said. "But because we have lived in it, we can have an appreciation for it."

Surprisingly, the house sat on the market for more than a year. Despite its rare exterior and prime location, potential buyers saw it as a huge undertaking and were scared away. And Stumpo remarked that many home buyers today shun a design so out of

line with traditional homes.

"But at the end of the day, what one person thinks is beautiful is different from what another thinks. And that's art," she said. "You have to be invited in to see its beauty. [When it's done] it's going to be simple, but grand."

And Shaar makes no qualms about her own feelings.

"It's like a museum," she said. "People say it's the 'white house' and I [feel] like the first lady."

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